



SAO ALUMNI PROFILE – JUDGE ERIC WM. HENDON

This February we feature an SAO Alumnus who has practiced law for four decades in a variety of roles within the criminal and civil justice systems. He is the first African American alum to become a Judge in Florida's Third District Court of Appeal, where he serves along with quite a few other former prosecutors. This month's SAO Alumni Profile is Judge Eric Wm. Hendon.

Judge Eric Wm. Hendon is the oldest of four children born to a Bahamian mother and Floridian father. "My dad was in the army and stationed at Ft. Bliss in El Paso, Texas when I was born. My memories of that time are dust and tumbleweeds."

They moved around a lot as military families do, but when Judge Hendon was about two years old, they moved to Florida.

Growing up in the area of 50th Street and N.W. 19th Ave, Judge Hendon always knew that he wanted to be a lawyer. He would watch Perry Mason and The Defenders on television and was drawn to the search for the truth that took place in the courtroom. "The objective is to try to achieve justice no matter what side you are representing," he adds.

After graduating from Miami Springs High School, Judge Hendon went on to the University of Florida where he majored in English before attending law school there. He was originally going to major in Political Science, but a chance encounter changed everything.

"One week before starting my undergrad at UF, I went for a bike ride on campus. I got to the law school library and asked a student advice on what I needed to do to get into law school. He directed me to a counselor that happened to be walking by. The counselor advised me that I should major in English and take as many writing classes as I could. He explained that law school is all about reading, comprehending,

organizing and expressing yourself clearly. So, I rode my bike to the registrar's office and changed my major to English. It was the best decision I made. My advice to anyone that wants to become a lawyer is to major in English."

Judge Hendon also recommends that law school graduates work in the public service arena because there they can get a deep foundation and develop skills and practical knowledge of the law that they can't get anywhere else.

Everyone has an important responsibility in the criminal justice system, and Judge Hendon has played each role with the integrity and commitment of someone who values the principles of jurisprudence. "As an appellate judge, you use all the experience that you gained coming up through the ranks."

While in law school, Judge Hendon was a Certified Legal Intern at the Public Defender's Office in the Fourth Judicial Circuit, Jacksonville, Florida. He was assigned to the Felony Trial Division where he assisted with case preparation and legal research. He was actively involved in all aspects of a trial. "It was the only unit with two African American lawyers, and they became his mentors. After that summer, I was sold on being a lawyer in the criminal justice system."

After law school, he applied to the SAO and the PD's office in Miami-Dade. He interviewed at both and received job offers from both. Funny enough the start dates for both jobs was the same day. So, he went to the courthouse where both offices were housed still not sure which position to accept. But fate had it that he exited the elevator on the sixth floor and became an Assistant State Attorney (ASA).

"I started at the SAO in the Appellate Division and that is where I had my first encounter with the Third District Court of Appeal. I remember the first time I went there and stood at the podium. I was only 22 years old. I was very nervous speaking to the three judges. I never imagined that one day I would be one of those three judges."

He later transferred to the Felony Division, where he remained until he left in 1981 to become Director of Legal Services for the James E. Scott Community Association (JESCA). Though he loved being an ASA, the opportunity to use his skills to help his community was something that he could not pass up. There, Judge Hendon supervised a staff of attorneys, paralegals, and clerical employees. JESCA provided representation to the residents of low-income housing projects throughout Miami-Dade County in the areas of family law, landlord/tenant matters, and administrative law.

From 1984 to 1990, Judge Hendon worked in private practice and represented clients before the County, Circuit, and Federal Courts of South Florida in civil, criminal, and administrative matters. He also represented clients before the Third District Court of Appeal and the Florida Supreme Court.

After applying to be a county judge but not getting the position, he was once again extended an offer to join the Public Defender's Office. "They knew I wanted to eventually be a judge and offered me a job anyway. I didn't think I would be there long, but it turned into nine years." He represented hundreds of clients charged with criminal offenses before the circuit courts and also served as a Felony Training Attorney, responsible for training new felony Assistant Public Defenders.

In December 1999, Judge Hendon was appointed to the bench by Gov. Jeb Bush and assigned to the County Court Criminal Division. Though he ran for reelection, he did not win. However, the loss taught him a great lesson. "I thought that being a good judge was being the best possible judge I could be in the courtroom. Though that is true, you also have to be out in the community letting people know who you are and your commitment to the community."

His career path then led to the Office of the Attorney General where he served as the Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Civil Rights. There, he not only helped enforce the Florida Civil Rights Act, but he prosecuted the first case under the law against a hotel in Perry, Florida that didn't allow guests who were people of color. "We proved our case, and the hotel went out of business."

He returned to private practice for a few years before being appointed judge once again. In 2006, Gov. Bush reappointed him to County Court, but this time he served in the Civil Division where he heard civil matters including: PIP, small claim cases, collection cases, uncontested divorces, landlord-tenant and domestic violence cases.

Then in 2012, Gov. Rick Scott appointed him to the Circuit Court where he served in the Civil and Criminal Divisions.

"My first courtroom as a Circuit Judge was 4-4. I had fond memories there since I had also served as a prosecutor and defense counsel in that courtroom."

He then set his sights even higher. "I put in an application for the Third District Court of Appeal and didn't get selected the first time, but I got selected the second time." No one was surprised. Those who know Judge Hendon can attest that he is a man who always strives for more and always challenges himself.

In 2018, he was appointed to the Third District Court of Appeal by Gov. Scott. "The most important thing that I have learned is to never give up. I was nominated for a judicial appointment several times but did not get appointed until my seventh nomination. Everything I have done in my career has given me the skills and experience to do what I do now."

"Judge Hendon's broad legal experience has provided him with a hands-on understanding of the daily needs and demands of Florida's legal system," said State

Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle. “This valuable understanding is augmented by his deep belief that justice should always work for the people and not be something done to them. This vision, which we both share, is one of the reasons the opinions of our Third District Court of Appeals are so widely respected throughout Florida.”

Judge Hendon has another important connection to our office. It is where he met his lovely wife and SAO Alum Diane Kennedy, who was a secretary in Major Crimes at the time. “Her desk was right by the coffee pot, so every time I had to go there as a defense attorney, I would always ask if I could have a cup of coffee just so I could talk to her. When she finally agreed to go out with me, she told me that I couldn’t let anyone at work know. We actually kept it private for years,” he fondly recalls.

After trying 90 cases, having 20 years of litigation experience under his belt, and serving 20 years on the bench, Judge Hendon has seen the criminal justice system from all angles.

“All sides in a courtroom are about making sure that you do the right thing, and that justice is served. We all have the responsibility to protect the victim’s rights, the accused’s rights, and the public’s rights.”

For Judge Hendon, the most challenging part of his position is staying well abreast of laws and case law of the case subjects before him. “You need to be on top of things and be prepared.”

“It is also important to make sure to be pleasant with people you interact with because you will be with them the rest of your career. One lapse of judgment can affect your career, and your reputation is all you have. Treat everyone with civility and it will go a long way.”